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Who is "THAT guy"?

A new Ottawa-based campaign asks men to think twice about how they treat women while under the influence. But what we really need is a campaign that draws attention to the sort of guy men should be, and the role fathers play in shaping that.

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A new campaign in the city of Ottawa aims to place posters in local bars to discourage men from taking advantage of women who have had too much to drink. The campaign tag line reads, "Don't be THAT guy." [1] We'd all implore our sons, brothers and friends to "not be that guy" and, of course, the majority of men are not. But the slogan raises deeper questions about manhood; what "guy" should a man be, and how is he to know?

The trouble with boys

There is a growing public discourse on the trouble with boys. Boys are more likely to drop out of high school and are now outpaced by women in university enrolment. In today's knowledge economy, there are three women for every two men at university. [2]

Young men are reaching traditional milestones of adulthood (career, homeownership and marriage) later in life, if at all. Almost twice as many men in their twenties live at home than in 1981. [3]

The trouble with young men is also spilling out on to the street. Youth violence has always been primarily an issue among boys. While Canada's street gang issue may not yet rival that of our American cousins, it is by some accounts a growing problem in Canada with the majority of members being young men under the age of 21. [4]

Theories on why boys are falling behind are plentiful, and there is no shortage of finger pointing. In her controversial book *Save the Males*, journalist Kathleen Parker fingers the "SitCom Man", the fictional buffoon-as-father prevalent in pop culture. Parker wonders what problems will arise for a generation of boys indoctrinated with the "SitCom Man" stereotype in the absence of real role models at home. [5]

At the heart of Parker's thesis is the assertion that second and third wave feminism has perpetuated an anti-male bias that permeates culture and society from early education through to the law courts. What seems to be clear is that when the genders go to war, few bystanders are left unscathed and there are even fewer victors. When one gender falters, both lose. Perhaps no institution has been more impacted by gender warfare than the family. But no matter who we blame, it remains true that the first classroom of life is the family and a growing number of homes are missing fathers.

Moms and dads bring unique attributes to parenting. Married together, these attributes offer the best outcomes for children. When dads are absent, something more than a source of income is missing. Social scientists once declared fathers the forgotten factor in child development, but now there is a large body of research that points to the unique role fathers have in raising children. Studies show that children learn to regulate their feelings of aggression through roughhousing with dad. [6] Further research suggests that young people who are engaged with their fathers possess greater confidence –not the false machismo of modern action movie actors. [7] Not surprisingly, men in prison are more likely to come from father-absent homes. [8]

Marriage matters

Marriage is more than a piece of paper. It is the institution that binds men to their families, securing the daily interaction between fathers and their children. A father models how to treat women through the way he loves his wife. This modeling is found less and less in homes. Forty percent of children in the United States experience family dissolution by the age of 15. [9] The result is that many children see less of their biological father because of family dissolution even though many dads in these circumstances desire more time with their children.

There are many sources that influence a boy's understanding of what it means to be a man, but fathers are immensely important. Fathers communicate what it means to be a man through words and actions. Marriage supports the bond between men and family and healthy marriages benefit society as a whole.

As David Blankenhorn, author of *Fatherless America* argues, "...in all societies, child well-being and societal success hinge largely upon a high level of paternal investment: the willingness of adult males to devote energy and resources to the care of offspring." [10] It is true that not all father/child relationships are healthy and that in the absence of a father, other men can step in as mentors and coaches. These relationships should be encouraged, but they do not completely replace fathers. Dads remain the primary example in a boy's life and they bestow manhood on their sons.

We can certainly hope that this Ottawa poster campaign will deter "that guy" from abusing drunk women. However, a larger cultural change is required in order for a more positive masculinity to prevail. There is a larger question of what manhood and masculinity mean in our society. Maybe it's time for a different poster campaign: one that clearly delineates how and why fathers have a primary, non-negotiable role in helping their sons navigate manhood. Until then, we'll likely continue to see distressing and criminal behaviour in bars across Canada.

Endnotes

1. Taylor, L. (2011, May 20). "Don't be THAT guy": Edgy campaign targets link between alcohol and sexual violence. *Ottawa Citizen*.
2. Intini, J. (2006, June 26). Female university enrolment exceeds male. *Maclean's*.
3. Families count: Profiling Canada's families IV. (2010). Vanier Institute of the Family.
4. Mitchell, P.J. (2008, April 24). Canadian street gangs: How bad, and what to do? eReview no. 40. Institute of Marriage and Family Canada.
5. Parker, K. (2008). *Save the males: Why men matter, why women should care*. New York: Random House, pp. 16-17.
6. Wilcox, W.B. (2011). *Vive la difference: Gender & parenthood*. A presentation to the IMFC Policy Conference 2011, May 5th, 2011 at Ottawa, Canada. His powerpoint is online at http://www.imfcanda.org/article_files/Wilcox_powerpointslides.ppt
His presentation is online at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1-Yu4F7vAdM>
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. Andersson, G. (2002). Children's experience of family disruption and family formation. *Demographic Research* 7. p. 351.
10. Blankenhorn, D. as quoted by Kathleen Parker in *Save the males*, p. 68.